

COMPREHENSION AND PRODUCTION OF L2 PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE: A REVIEW OF L2 PRAGMATIC DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: *This paper overviews the empirical research on comprehension and production of L2 Pragmatic Competence in terms of methodology. It first discusses two major types of studies in L2 pragmatics, namely longitudinal study and cross-sectional study, the focus of the two kinds of studies as well as their respective advantages and disadvantages. Then it mainly describes cross-sectional studies in the past 20 years in terms of in terms of research content and findings, dividing the research into two categories: comprehension and production of L2 pragmatic competence. Finally, two primary methods of data collection adopted in these two categories are reviewed.*

KEYWORDS: L2 pragmatics, cross-sectional study, pragmatic competence

INTRODUCTION

L2 pragmatics or interlanguage pragmatics is an emerging interdisciplinary within linguistics which combines the study of pragmatics and the second language acquisition research. It mainly addresses how L2 learners or non-native speakers comprehend and produce the linguistic action in context (Kasper, 1993). This ability to acquire and use linguistic action patterns is known as pragmatic competence, incorporating sociolinguistics and pragmalinguistics.

Over the last two decades, a number of studies in L2 pragmatics have attempted to uncover the developmental issues of pragmatic competence. As Taguchi (2015) claimed, unlike native speakers, non-native language learners have considerable difficulty in learning pragmatic knowledge for its complexity involving more than just focus-on-form; it is also culturally and socially bound. Therefore, developmental studies should not only focus on the description of pragmatic language use, but also intend to capture changes in pragmatic competence and explain these changes by examining influences (Taguchi, 2018).

Previous research concerning these issues is mainly subject to two areas: longitudinal and cross-sectional studies among which the longitudinal research has generated the most findings for the last two decades. Longitudinal studies are concerned with changes and factors affecting the changes by tracing the same participant(s) over a period of time. From 2000 to 2020, I found about 30 longitudinal studies from the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). Most studies focus on instruction as the main factor in the development of pragmatic competence and assess its impact on learning outcomes (Taguchi, 2018). Some studies showed that instruction, especially explicit instruction revealed a positive effect on the development of pragmatically appropriate L2 (e.g., Halenko & Jones, 2011; van Compernelle, 2011; Polat, 2011; Cunningham & Vyatkina, 2012; van Compernelle & Kinginger, 2013; Li & Taguchi, 2014; Henery, 2015; Halenko & Jones, 2017; Nguyen, Do, Pham, & Nguyen, 2018; Rieger, 2018). While there were a few studies (e.g., Pearson, 2006) indicating that instructions had few significant effects on the lower level learners of L2. In addition to the instructional studies, many research investigated how students' pragmatic competence developed in a study abroad (SA) context. Existing findings unanimously demonstrated that exposure to target language countries played a greater role in explaining pragmatic development (Hassall, 2013; Shively, 2013; Hassall, 2015; Deng & Ranta, 2019; Sanchez-Hernandez & Alcon-Soler, 2019) than other factors like level of proficiency (Matsumura, 2003), learners' background culture (Sahez-Hernadez, 2018). Though longitudinal research can be used to address developmental issues, variables are too many and difficult to predict, including both contextual and individual variables.

While longitudinal studies do make a contribution to the development of pragmatic competence, cross-sectional studies can also offer some insights into the developmental research. By collecting data from different stages of L2 learning, the cross-sectional studies mainly deal with factors that may influence development of pragmatic competence, such as L2 proficiency (Chang, 2010; Taguchi, 2011; Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012; Taguchi, 2013), length of stay in the target language community (Xu, Case, & Wang, 2009), the intensity of interaction (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011), L1 transfer (Nguyen, 2008), gender and multilingualism (Roever, Wang, & Brophy, 2014). As Taguchi asserted, "Any differences in pragmatic performance gleaned from the comparison across groups are attributed to changes that learners exhibit at different stages of their L2 learning and thus are considered to provide developmental insights" (2018, p. 2). It is agreed that proficiency has a positive effect on pragmatic development, but results diverge greatly on other factors, which still needs to be further investigated. Besides the studies on factors that may influence the pragmatic development, a few are

attempting to explore the order of acquisition, such as Chang's study (2010), which revealed that the developmental patterns of the speech act of apology in L2 correspond to the developmental patterns of the L2 request; Nguyen found evidence of an acquisitional order for criticism modifiers: "learners tended to acquire lexicalized modifiers before they acquired grammaticalized modifiers" (2008, p. 787). Cross-sectional studies, though cannot trace the same participants' pragmatic development over time, contribute to the body of research on developmental issues in L2 pragmatics owing to its easily controlled variables and available wide range of participants.

Taguchi (2018) has reviewed longitudinal investigation with explicit attention paid to the quantitative and qualitative methods, and then proposed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Timpe-Laughlin (2017) has investigated adult learners' acquisitional patterns in L2 pragmatics by reviewing 16 empirical studies from 2002 to 2015, containing both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies. Few have ever reviewed the cross-sectional studies in L2 pragmatics systematically and exclusively. This paper reviews cross-sectional investigation with special attention paid to the methodology adopted in studies. Two dimensions will be analyzed:

1. Which type of methodology do they use? (i.e., whether the study examined production or comprehension data)
2. Which kind of methods do they utilize to collect the data?

TYPE OF METHODOLOGY

Production of linguistic action

One of the main functions of learning a language is to use it, which also provides justifications for studying the production of linguistic action. From 2000 to 2020, I found 14 studies on linguistic production among the total of 18 cross-sectional studies. The studies mainly focused on the production of speech acts, especially on request and apology (Al Masaeed, Waugh, & Burns, 2018; Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2012, 2014; Chang, 2010; Hassall, 2003; Roever & Al-Gahtani, 2015; Savic, 2015). Some research also investigated dispreference marking in refusals (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2018), acquisition of conventional expressions (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Bardovi-Harlig & Su, 2018), and modification of criticism (Nguyen, 2008). It is worth noting that the studies on linguistic production not only paid attention to the content of production but also attached great importance to strategies the participants used, the sequential organization of the interactions, and also the fine-tuning of the production.

The results of these studies mainly rested on the surface of comparing native speakers with non-native speakers, as well as low-proficiency learners with high-proficiency learners. Few studies have further probed into the development path of pragmatic competence. Hassall (2003) suggested that a U-shaped curve of development was likely in the acquisition of request strategies after examining how Australian learners of Indonesian perform requests in everyday situations compared to Indonesian native speakers. This finding may probably rejected the notion that increased linguistic proficiency had failed to bring about a significant improvement in the aspect of requesting. Nguyen's (2008) study explored how ESL modified criticisms in peer-feedback sessions, finding an acquisitional order for criticism modifiers: learners tended to acquire lexicalized modifiers before they acquired grammaticalized modifiers. This finding proved that syntactically complex structures, which are more cognitively demanding, are acquired later than the simpler structures which are easier to process. Although these two studies are from over a decade ago, they offer us a significant reference. Future studies should pay more attention to the internal development of pragmatic competence.

Pragmatic Comprehension

Relatively speaking, the studies on pragmatic comprehension were much less. Kasper (2001) claims that pragmatic competence includes the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge and gaining automatic control in processing it in real-time. The processing is reflected in the comprehension of pragmatic knowledge. Taguchi (2011) also affirms L2 pragmatic studies should not only focus on accurate and appropriate pragmatic performance, but also be based on learners' processing efficiency in performing pragmatic functions, thus further expanding the construct of pragmatic competence.

Taguchi's (2011) study examined the effects of L2 proficiency and study-abroad experience on pragmatic comprehension. In the study, Taguchi viewed pragmatic comprehension as the ability to comprehend conventional and nonconventional implicatures accurately, in a speedy manner. The study revealed which aspects of pragmatic comprehension could develop naturally in a home country environment corresponding to their linguistic maturity and which aspects benefit more from exposure to the target language community.

Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos (2011) investigated both the recognition and use of conventional expressions. Previous research had found that the learners' production of conventional expressions correlates significantly with recognition. However, most of the studies either explored pragmatic comprehension or the production of linguistic

action. Compared with these, Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos undertook an investigation of a reasonably large sample of learners in two areas of pragmatic development, the recognition of conventional expressions as a pragmalinguistic resource, and the use of conventional expressions, requiring both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge. The results showed that different factors may influence different aspects of the pragmatic acquisition. Though this study took both production and comprehension of linguistic action into account, it did not show any correlation between them.

Chang (2011) focused on how sociopragmatic competence and pragmalinguistic competence were related by collecting both perception and production data. The results presented that these two aspects of pragmatic competence “is a complex and interwoven one rather than a simple, linear “which-precedes-which” kind of relation” (Chang, 2011, p. 797). This study only observed the use of apology strategies in a specific context, but the results could shed light on the pragmatic development studies.

To enhance the practice of cross-sectional research in L2 pragmatics, we need a research design that incorporates production data with comprehension data. At the same time, we need more penetrating research which can reveal the order behind the phenomenon.

METHODS OF ASSESSING PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

Methods for Producing Pragmatic Competence

a) Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs)

DCTs are the most widely used type of research instrument. They can be further divided into Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs) and Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (ODCTs). In ODCTs, test takers spoke their utterance into a microphone; while in traditional WDCTs, they wrote ‘what they would say’; Both of the methods were designed around high/low settings of the contextual variables Power, Social Distance, and Imposition. In cross-sectional studies from 2000 to 2020, I found 8 studies using DCTs to assess participants’ pragmatic competence.

Chang’s (2010, 2011) study applied WDCT for the reason that the participants in his study contained young learners whose L2 proficiency was low and the oral tasks would elicit their great anxiety, which led to the production of brief and choppy utterances. Therefore, in order to manifest their actual language ability, Chang used WDCT allowing the L2 learners to produce an L2 apology that better reflects their current L2 proficiency.

While Al Masaeed et al. (2018) used ODCT, they asserted that this approach (i.e. ODCTs) resembles natural discourse, in contrast with WDCTs, and gives the researcher some control over designing the appropriate context for specific speech acts in order to enable drawing a comparison between subject responses in the groups easily. Furthermore, real-time oral responses provide insights into the degree to which learners can apply specific pragmatic knowledge

Rose (2009) claimed that though DCTs had been the most widely used data collection procedures, widespread use is not evidence of validity. Therefore, in her study, the DCT did not provide information about how any of the respondents would make English requests in face-to-face interaction, but it did provide information regarding respondents' knowledge and attitudes regarding the use of English requests, and as such can be used as a measure of changes in knowledge and attitudes across groups that might be indicative of development. She also advocated that the scenarios used in studies should not be designed by the imagination of researchers. Participants' background-the commonly-used scenarios in their daily life needed to be taken into account. In her study, she asked students to write down the daily scenarios of requests and apologies, and studies only used the assessed scenarios. Actually, she applied ODCTs in her study, where after understanding the tasks and scenarios, participants were instructed to say (in English) what they thought the role in the scenarios would say.

DCTs remain the most widely used type of instrument, but it is also subject to criticism for its inadequateness to represent the actual pragmatic competence in actual performance. It gives rise to another instrument, namely role play, which emphasized more on real interaction.

b) Role Play

The use of role-playing data or natural speech has been advocated by several researchers. There are 5 studies which used role play for collecting data. Al-Gahtani and Roever's (2012) investigated proficiency and sequential organization of L2 requests and their participants were from 19 years old to 36 years old. In Roever and Al-Gahtani's (2015) study which investigated multiple requests in Arabic, the learners' ages ranged from 18 to 25. Hassall (2003) examined how Australian learners of Indonesian perform requests in everyday situations compared to Indonesian native speakers, and their participants were in 18-24 age group.

Therefore, it is not difficult to find that all role-play tasks were conducted among adults, because they were better at processing and performing linguistic action without causing too much anxiety. In addition, though role play instrument can manifest the real use of pragmatic competence, researchers have recognized that the data may not be equivalent to natural conversations, and it was not always possible to distinguish in analyses whether participants were orienting to the role play or the make-believe situation in the role play. Taguchi stated that

The nature of role play is additionally taxing because it requires joint construction of discourse. Learners must align their behavior to the projection of the unfolding discourse, dictated by their interlocutor's action, in order to shape their contribution to the conversation. (2015, p. 12)

In fact, DCT and role play manifest different levels of testing. DCT taps into learners' competence or knowledge of pragmalinguistic forms. Role play, on the other hand, can more accurately reflect the performance of learners and determines whether learners can use their pragmalinguistic knowledge to accomplish higher-level goals, such as negotiation, mutual understanding, and interaction. How to choose between them? One of the criteria lies in the age of participants for ODCTs or role play only suits for adults. The goals of studies are also crucial for selecting what types of methods during the research.

Assessment for Pragmatic Comprehension

How to assess participants' understanding of linguistic action? There are several methods found in the cross-sectional studies on L2 pragmatics, such as aural recognition task (Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011), web-based pragmatics test (Roever, et al., 2014) and pragmatic listening test (Taguchi, 2011).

The aural recognition task was originated from the dichotomous written familiarity task in which learners identified conventional expressions that they knew from a (decontextualized) list of expressions. The aural recognition task overcame problems of the binary written recognition task used in the earlier study with three important changes: the use of aural stimuli, adoption of a rating scale with three alternatives (I often/ sometimes/never hear this), and inclusion of conventional expressions piloted in the local community with modified counterparts. The web-based pragmatics test was completely delivered on the Web and it contained multiple choice for the implicature and routines sections; for the speech act section, the participants were required to type

brief responses. It was a more flexible and easily controlled test. Taguchi's (2007) pragmatic listening test was also conducted on a computer. It allowed participants to listen to conversations containing Conventional and nonconventional implicatures and chose the best responses to the dialogue from four possible answers. It is worth noting that the conversations were all from corpora of face-to-face conversations of American English and the researcher also modified and adapted dialogues to better serve the level of the target learner group and goals of the research.

The three methods were the same in nature, no matter it was conducted on computers or not. They all asked students to choose the answer to dialogue or the responses to a situation. Moreover, the possible answers were so limited that there may exist some more responses which did not appear in the multiple choice. Last but not least, all of the data were analyzed based on the participants' judgement or different kinds of responses, but it did not really test to what extent they comprehend the pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, it would be better to assess the process of participants' comprehension, such as to collect the time it takes to process the meaning of dialogue by DMDX or E-prime.

CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed cross-sectional studies on L2 pragmatic development in terms of the research contents and methods about comprehension and production of pragmatic competence among L2 learners. To shed more light on cross-sectional research in L2 pragmatics, we need more research designs that incorporate production data with comprehension data. At the same time, we need more penetrating research which can reveal the acquisition order behind the different stages of performance. As for methods, researchers should not only take participants' age, background, proficiency and some other variables into account, but also bear the goal of research in mind. What is more, the existed data analysis was based on the participants' judgement or different kinds of responses, but it did not really test to what extent they comprehend the pragmatic knowledge. Therefore, it would be better to collect the response time for each participant, so as to compare the very differences among different proficiency-level learners.

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